WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1.   An electronic catalog system, comprising:

an electronic catalog of items that are available for purchase, the electronic catalog including pages that include descriptions of the items, and providing functionality for online users to select items to purchase;

a wish list application that provides functionality for users of the electronic catalog to create wish lists with items selected from the electronic catalog, and to purchase items as gifts from the wish lists of other users;

a database which stores information about affiliations between the users; and

a notification component which is responsive, to an online request from a first user for a catalog page which includes a description of a first item, by at least (a) determining whether the first item is on an electronic wish list of a user who is affiliated with the first user, and (b) when the first item is determined to be on an electronic wish list of a second user who is affiliated with the first user, supplementing the page with a notification that the first item is on the wish list of the second user;

whereby users are notified, during browsing of the electronic catalog, when accessed items are on the electronic wish lists other users.

2.   The system of Claim 1, further comprising a cache memory which stores wish lists of users affiliated with the first user while the first user browses the electronic catalog, wherein the notification component accesses the cache memory to determine whether items viewed by the first user are on the wish lists of users affiliated with the first user.

3.   The system of Claim 1, further comprising a component that updates the database to indicate an affiliation between two users as a result of one user purchasing a gift for the other user.

4.   The system of Claim 1, further comprising a component that updates the database to indicate an affiliation between two users as a result of one user sending an electronic card to the other user.

5. The system of Claim 1, further comprising a form page from which users may explicitly create affiliations with other users.

6. The system of Claim 1, wherein the notification component is further responsive to the online request by notifying the first user if the first item is similar to an item on a wish list of an affiliated user.

7. The system of Claim 1, wherein the notification component provides, within the notification, a selectable link to the wish list of the second user.

8. The system of Claim 1, wherein the notification component indicates, within the notification, at least one of (a) a date the first item was added to the wish list, and (b) a date the wish list was last updated.

9. The system of Claim 1, wherein the notification component provides, within the notification, information about an upcoming gift-giving event associated with the second user.

10. The system of Claim 1, wherein the catalog page is a product detail page.

11. The system of Claim 1, wherein the catalog page includes a list of items.

12. A method of assisting users in selecting items to purchase from an electronic catalog of items, the method comprising:

maintaining electronic wish lists for each of a plurality of users;

for at least a first user, maintaining data indicating a set of other users that are affiliated with the first user ("affiliated users");

monitoring browsing of the electronic catalog by the first user to determine whether items accessed by the first user are on electronic wish lists of the affiliated users; and

notifying the first user during said browsing of the electronic catalog when an accessed item is determined to be on an electronic wish list of an affiliated user.

13. The method of Claim 12, wherein monitoring browsing of the electronic catalog by the first user comprises maintaining wish lists of at least some of the affiliated users in a cache memory, and using the cache memory to determine whether items accessed by the first user are on electronic wish lists of the affiliated users.

14. The method of Claim 12, further comprising updating the data to add a second user to the set of affiliated users in response to one of the following: (a) the first user purchasing an item from an electronic wish list of the second user; (b) the first user purchasing a gift for the second user; or (c) the first user sending an electronic card to the second user.

15. The method of Claim 12, further comprising providing an option for the first user to explicitly designate said affiliated users.

16. The method of Claim 12, wherein notifying the first user comprises displaying a notification message on a catalog page that includes a description of the accessed item.

17. The method of Claim 16, wherein the catalog page is a product detail page for the accessed item.

18. The method of Claim 16, wherein the catalog page is a search results page generated in response to a query submission by the first user.

19. The method of Claim 16, wherein the catalog page is a category page that includes a list of items falling within a particular category of the electronic catalog.

20. The method of Claim 16, wherein the notification message includes an explicit or implicit indication of at least one of (a) a date the accessed item was added to the wish list, and (b) a date the wish list was last updated.

21. The method of Claim 16, wherein the notification message includes information about an upcoming gift-giving event associated with the second user.

22. The method of Claim 12, wherein notifying the first user comprises outputting an audible message.

23. The method of Claim 12, further comprising determining whether, and notifying the first user when, an accessed item is similar to an item on a wish list of an affiliated user.

24. A method of assisting users in selecting items to purchase from an electronic catalog of items, the method comprising:

    maintaining an electronic wish list of a first user, the electronic wish list including items selected from the electronic catalog by the first user and being accessible to other users;

in response to a second user purchasing an item from the electronic wish list of the first user, updating a data repository to indicate that the first user is affiliated with the second user; and

subsequently to updating the data repository, monitoring browsing of the electronic catalog by the second user and, during said browsing of the electronic catalog, notifying the second user when an item accessed by the second user is on the electronic wish list of the first user.

25.   The method of Claim 24, wherein notifying the second user comprises supplementing a page of the catalog with a message indicating that an item displayed therein is on the wish list of the first user.

26.   The method of Claim 25, wherein the page is a product detail page for the item.

27.   The method of Claim 25, wherein the page is a search results page generated in response to a query submitted by the second user.

28.   The method of Claim 25, wherein the page is a category page that includes a list of items falling within a particular category of the electronic catalog.

29.   The method of Claim 25, wherein the message indicates at least one of (a) a date the item was added to the wish list, and (b) a date the wish list was last updated.

30.   The method of Claim 25, wherein the message includes information about an upcoming gift-giving event associated with the first user.

31.   The method of Claim 24, wherein notifying the second user comprises outputting an audible message.

32.   The method of Claim 24, further comprising determining whether, and notifying the second user when, an accessed item is similar to an item on a wish list of the first user.

33.   A method of assisting users in selecting items to purchase from an electronic catalog of items, the method comprising:

maintaining electronic wish lists for each of a plurality of users;

for at least a first user, maintaining affiliation data indicating a set of other users that are affiliated with the first user ("affiliated users");

-28-

maintaining similarity data which indicates similarities between items in the catalog; and

when the first user accesses a first item in the electronic catalog, determining whether, and notifying the first user if, the first item is similar to an item on an electronic wish list of an affiliated user, as reflected by the similarity data.

34. The method of Claim 33, further comprising generating the similarity data at least by analyzing user browsing histories to identify items that are accessed in combination relatively frequently.

35. The method of Claim 33, further comprising updating the affiliation data, in response to the first user purchasing an item from an electronic wish list of a second user, to add the second user to the set of affiliated users.

36. A method of assisting users in purchasing gifts associated with gift-giving events, the method comprising:

maintaining an electronic wish list of a first user, the electronic wish list including items selected from an electronic catalog by the first user and being accessible to other users;

identifying a second user who is affiliated with the first user; and

sending to the second user a message regarding a gift-giving event associated with the first user together with a link to the electronic wish list of the first user, to thereby facilitate purchasing of a gift associated with the gift giving event.

37. The method of Claim 36, further comprising predicting a timing of the gift-giving event based on an action performed by at least one user other than the first user.

38. The method of Claim 37, wherein predicting the timing of the gift-giving event comprises using a purchase date of a gift purchased for the first user as an indication of the timing of an annual gift-giving event.

39. The method of Claim 36, further comprising predicting a type of the gift-giving event by at least one of the following methods: (a) analyzing gift message text

entered by a purchaser of a gift for the first user; (b) determining a type of gift wrap selected by a purchaser of a gift for the first user.

40.   The method of Claim 36, wherein identifying a second user who is affiliated with the first user comprises treating the second user as being affiliated with the first user as the result of at least one of (a) an online gift purchase made by the second user for the first user, and (b) an online gift purchase made by the first user for the second user.

41.   The method of Claim 36, wherein identifying a second user who is affiliated with the first user comprises treating the second user as being affiliated with the first user as the result of at least one of (a) transmission of an electronic card by the first user to the second user; and (b) transmission of an electronic card by the second user to the first user.

42.   The method of Claim 36, wherein the message and link are sent to the second user by electronic mail.

43.   A method of assisting users in purchasing gifts associated with recurring gift-giving events, the method comprising:

maintaining an electronic wish list for a first user, the electronic wish list including items selected from an electronic catalog by the first user and being accessible to other users;

detecting, and recording information regarding, an online purchase by a second user of a gift for the first user; and

during a selected time period prior to an anniversary of the purchase, transmitting, to the second user, a reminder of the purchase and a link to the electronic wish list.

44.   The method of Claim 43, wherein a decision of whether to transmit the reminder takes into consideration content of gift message text entered by the second user when making the purchase of the gift for the first user.

45.   The method of Claim 43, wherein the online purchase of the gift is a purchase made from the electronic wish list of the first user.

46.   The method of Claim 43, wherein the selected time period is less than 50 days.

47.   The method of Claim 43, wherein the reminder and link are transmitted to the second user by electronic mail.